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Status of preparations for the International Year of Freshwater, 2003

Report of the Secretary-General** ***

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 55/196 of 20 December 2000, in which the Assembly proclaimed the year 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater; invited the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination to serve as the coordinating entity for the Year and to develop relevant preliminary proposals for consideration by the Assembly at its fifty-sixth session on possible activities, including possible sources of funding, that could take place at all levels, as appropriate.

The report describes potential activities, initiatives and networking at the international, national and local levels and provides examples of fund-raising activities that could be undertaken at the international and national levels. It also explores issues that require greater attention during the Year and proposes further steps to be taken in preparation for it.

* A/56/150.

** The present report was delayed as preparations for the International Year of Freshwater only commenced in late June 2001.

*** The present report was prepared by the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination in its capacity as the coordinating entity for the International Year of Freshwater. The status of the Subcommittee on Water Resources is currently under review as part of the reform of the machinery of the Administrative Committee on Coordination as a whole. The activities in support of the International Year of Freshwater will be carried out by relevant entities of the United Nations system in collaboration with Governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 55/196 of 20 December 2000, the General Assembly proclaimed 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater; encouraged Member States, the United Nations system and all other actors to take advantage of the Year to increase awareness of the importance of freshwater; and called upon Member States, national and international organizations, major groups and the private sector to make voluntary contributions in accordance with the guidelines for international years and anniversaries.

2. In resolution 55/196, the General Assembly invited the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination to serve as the coordinating entity for the Year and to develop relevant preliminary proposals for consideration by the Assembly at its fifty-sixth session on possible activities, including possible sources of funding, that could take place at all levels, as appropriate.

3. The present report is submitted pursuant to that request. The Subcommittee on Water Resources has prepared the report in collaboration with its member United Nations entities and interested non-governmental organizations.

II. Background

4. Awareness of the importance of sustainable development, use and management of freshwater resources has increased in recent years, strongly supported by various ongoing international and national initiatives and activities. The most prominent framework is the broad-based effort to implement Agenda 21,[1] the programme of action adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and, in particular, its chapter 18, "Protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources". That policy framework was reconfirmed by the General Assembly at its nineteenth special session, in 1997, in the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 (resolution S-19/2, annex, paras. 34 and 35). The momentum gained at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development with regard to freshwater issues was further enhanced at the Expert Group Meeting on Strategic Approaches to Freshwater Management, held in Harare in 1998, and by the Commission on Sustainable Development by its decision 6/1, entitled "Strategic approaches to freshwater management".

5. Most recently, the United Nations Millennium Declaration (General Assembly resolution 55/2) contributed to the significance of and the ongoing momentum connected with the issue by explicitly addressing and formulating specific development targets with regard to freshwater issues. The General Assembly pledged to halve the number of people unable to reach or afford safe drinking water by 2015 and to stop the unsustainable exploitation of water resources by developing appropriate water management strategies at all levels.

6. The decision of the General Assembly to proclaim 2003 the International Year of Freshwater provides a unique opportunity to consolidate and build upon the many efforts carried out to date to protect, use and manage freshwater resources in a sustainable manner. It allows for renewed and intensified commitment to continue such efforts at all levels. Yet the real challenge is to focus attention on action-oriented activities and policies that ensure long-term protection of available water quantity and quality and sustainability of water resource utilization, including sanitation. The International Year is also an opportunity to build on the ongoing momentum of international freshwater activities and to reinforce existing initiatives, including for the World Summit for Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002. Collective action is required to build and strengthen the institutional and human capacity to carry on with sustainable freshwater resource development and protection efforts far beyond 2003.

7. The present report provides proposals on the institutional framework of the preparations for the Year and describes some of the international and national activities that could be carried out in connection with it. Finally, the report gives an indication of activities that lie ahead in the period leading up to 2003 and makes some suggestions as to how to link them with ongoing and future events.

III. Institutional arrangements

8. At the institutional level, the member organizations of the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination are discussing organizational matters and substantive contributions related to preparations for the Year, including the adoption of a unifying theme for it. These will be further elaborated upon at the twenty-second session of the Subcommittee from 24 to 28 September 2001, at which the vision, the objectives and relative priority of activities as well as the division of labour among member organizations will be defined more clearly. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have both indicated their readiness to coordinate the preparation of the programme of activities for the Year on behalf of the Subcommittee on Water Resources.

9. In addition to the Subcommittee as inter-agency coordinating body, several other actors will be instrumental in preparing for the Year. National Governments, non-governmental organizations and professional associations are expected to play leading roles in that regard. Those actors will include, inter alia, bodies such as the World Water Council, the Global Water Partnership and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council.

10. As a follow-up to its original initiative for the International Year of Freshwater, the Government of Tajikistan has proposed to convene a focus group of interested countries, represented by their permanent representatives to the United Nations in New York, to support public awareness strategies.

IV. International activities and initiatives

11. Within the United Nations system, freshwater policy issues are dealt with by a number of different bodies. The International Year of Freshwater provides a welcome challenge to strengthen and expand existing networking efforts among United Nations bodies and concerned stakeholders at all levels. It offers an appropriate platform for promoting ongoing actions and policies, in particular within the work programmes of the five United Nations regional economic commissions with their close links to interregional, regional and national political authorities. The organization of national workshops for training purposes and awareness-raising among politicians, legislative bodies and other important governmental institutions will be considered.

12. In 2003, a major conference dedicated to freshwater issues, the Third World Water Forum, organized by the World Water Council and hosted by the Government of Japan, will be held in Kyoto, Japan. The meeting will bring together the world's leading scientists and water experts as well as representatives of Governments, local authorities and non-governmental organizations in order to exchange knowledge and share information. The coincidence of the International Year of Freshwater with the Third World Water Forum provides an opportunity for reciprocal promotion of and cooperation on freshwater issues. In addition, the International Year provides an excellent framework for continuous networking and promotion of activities at all levels related to the Third World Water Forum.

13. At its sixth session, in 1997, the Commission for Sustainable Development called on the United Nations system to undertake periodic assessments of the sustainable development, management, protection and use of freshwater resources and to provide a global picture of the state of freshwater resources and potential problems. To comply with that mandate, the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination in 1998 launched the World Water Development Report. From that concept evolved the World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP) as an inter-agency initiative under the oversight of the Subcommittee, coordinated by the WWAP secretariat and hosted by UNESCO. WWAP will provide the background assessment for the World Water Development Report and both will contribute essential information and data with which to launch proposals on ways to conserve and manage water resources.

14. The World Water Development Report is the central product of the WWAP and is intended to be a comprehensive and scientific biennial report on the state of global freshwater resources. A first draft will be presented at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002, and the first edition will be available at the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto in

2003. Both presentations will ensure broad-based public and scientific attention and will enhance awareness of the International Year for Freshwater. The publication of the first edition in 2003 will be a milestone and will represent a major scientific contribution of the United Nations system to research on freshwater issues. It has already attracted considerable attention and expectation among researchers and water experts. The promotion of the World Water Development Report will be a major focus of the Year's public information activities. Additional and related scientific and political events, exhibits and conferences on freshwater issues will be linked and included in all promotional activities regarding the launch of the Report.

15. WWAP is supplemented, among other efforts, by the ongoing Global International Waters Assessment, coordinated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and funded by the Global Environment Facility. The Global International Waters Assessment is based at Kalmar University in Sweden and is supported by a broad range of scientific institutions and non-governmental organizations, which provide a useful network of contacts for the activities of the International Year.

16. The first edition of the World Water Development Report will concentrate on water in Africa as its special theme. Several United Nations agencies and special initiatives are running projects and programmes dedicated to African policy issues with emphasis on freshwater. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs has a long-standing technical cooperation programme for integrated water resource management in the region. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) and UNEP are jointly organizing an initiative entitled "Managing Water for African Cities" and the United Nations Special Initiative for Africa has agreed on main priorities that coincide with those established in the World Water Development Report. Improved networking and policy coherence among these and other United Nations initiatives and activities focusing on freshwater issues will be sought and enhanced. Those mechanisms will be further expanded to promote widely the Year's activities with regard to freshwater issues in Africa.

17. The sustainable use and management of transboundary rivers and lakes has many political implications and presents many challenges to efforts aimed at conflict resolution. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank and other United Nations entities collaborate closely and seek complementarity in support of management of transboundary fresh and marine water resources. A recently established UNDP/World Bank International Water Partnership has the Nile River Basin as its initial area of collaboration. The objective is to ensure close cooperation in supporting the riparian States in the sustainable and equitable development of the Nile River. The close partnership between UNDP and the World Bank and the extension of that partnership to include other multilateral and bilateral agencies is an imperative for achieving equitable utilization and shared benefit of common resources. Such partnerships will be actively publicized and supported during the International Year of Freshwater.

18. The secretariats of the related United Nations conventions (the Convention on Biological Diversity,[2] the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa[3] and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change),[4] and the 1971 Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat ("the Ramsar Convention") will be invited to make the information materials and brochures on the International Year of Freshwater available to their parties through their respective clearing-house mechanisms, as appropriate, with links from their respective web sites to the official web site for the Year.

19. Policy networks at the international and national levels combine a broad-based multi-stakeholder approach with successful dissemination of information at all levels. For example, the ongoing dialogue on water, food and environment is a joint initiative among pivotal international actors such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, UNEP, the World Health Organization, the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the World Water Council and the Global Water Partnership. The dialogue, convened by the International Water Management Institute, is intended to develop a global consensus among key stakeholders from the irrigation, environment and rural development communities on the role of future water needs in relation to food production and nature in developing countries. Future

meetings and related activities will be linked to and will promote the Year and related actions.

V. Public information strategy

20. Developing and strengthening collaboration, cooperation and exchange of information in preparing for and implementing the International Year of Freshwater is an important and crucial task. Through collaboration between the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat, and in cooperation with various Governments and non-governmental organizations, a public information strategy will be formulated. The Subcommittee on Water Resources will work closely with the Joint United Nations Information Committee to prepare adequate information and media kits covering the Year and to disseminate such information at all levels. The public information and media strategy will include the preparation and presentation of an official logo for the Year; information materials, brochures and press kits; educational materials for schools; videotapes and documentaries; as well as an official web site. Initial brainstorming and preparatory meetings on public information strategies and fund-raising opportunities have been organized.

21. The sustainable use and management of water resources has to be viewed in relationship to other United Nations initiatives and events, such as international years. The International Year of the Mountains in 2002 and the International Year of Ecotourism also in 2002 include activities aimed at the protection of natural resources in general and water-related aspects in particular. The Subcommittee on Water Resources will work closely with the programme managers for the international years being observed in 2002.

VI. Public awareness activities

22. In recent years, freshwater issues have received increasing political attention and have been put high on the international agenda. The remarkable number of past and future international and national conferences on freshwater issues is evidence of the current momentum. Such events provide excellent opportunities to promote the International Year of Freshwater far ahead of 2003. The public information strategy for the Year will take advantage of those events by putting the Year on the agenda of important conferences, such as the following:

(a) Annual Stockholm Water Symposium, 12-18 August 2001;

(b) Interregional Symposium on Water-related Disaster Reduction and Response, Bangkok, 27-31 August, 2001;

(c) Twenty-second session of the Subcommittee on Water Resources of the Administrative Committee on Coordination, Geneva, 24-28 September 2001;

(d) International Conference on Freshwater, Bonn, 3-7 December 2001, hosted by the Government of Germany;

(e) World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2002;

(f) Third World Water Forum, Kyoto, Japan, March 2003, organized by the World Water Council and hosted by the Government of Japan.

23. Several far-reaching initiatives that aim at increasing public awareness and providing key information on freshwater-related topics will be prepared in cooperation with non-profit organizations. Those initiatives could include, inter alia, the dissemination of messages related to management, conservation and protection of freshwater through educational exhibits at museums; public television and radio; documentary movies; children's books; and school curricula. The possibility of creating an International Year of Freshwater prize, aimed at awarding outstanding initiatives in the promotion of freshwater awareness, is being explored with possible donors.

24. The South Street Seaport Museum in New York, in partnership with the television production company Swynk Productions, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, is planning to prepare an educational exhibit in celebration of the International Year of Freshwater. Using Swynk footage and spokespersons, the exhibit will focus on the complexity of the freshwater crisis and the global imperative for solutions through policy review and revision, governance, conservation and innovative technology.

25. The exhibit could be designed in a travelling format for circulation to museums around the world. It

is expected to be accompanied by a catalogue of educational activities for curriculum adaptation by local educators with audio-visual components. A 6-hour television documentary, created by Swynk, was produced for the Public Broadcasting System and was broadcast in the United States; a 13 1/2-hour series was produced for European television. Through network contacts with the International Council of Museums, the International Congress of Maritime Museums, and other public and private organizations, the South Street Seaport Museum/Swynk partnership could market the exhibit and its programmes to maritime museums, natural history museums, aquariums and other educational institutions as a strategy to advance public awareness of critical freshwater issues internationally.

26. Television and radio broadcasting present powerful and far-reaching public awareness and communication channels. In cooperation with selected television production companies, such as Swynk, it is envisaged that the United Nations could produce and broadcast a number of television features and documentaries as well as educational materials to celebrate the year-long event.

27. The non-governmental Gender and Water Alliance, based in the Netherlands at the International Water and Sanitation Centre, in close cooperation with the secretariat of the Third World Water Forum and the Global Water Partnership as well as several interested donor countries, is producing a series of children's books on water issues. The objective of the project is to raise the level of awareness of children and teachers about water issues: the books may be used for educational purposes in schools and will be sold in bookstores worldwide. The launch of the book series is scheduled for early spring 2003 prior to the Third World Water Forum and will be used to promote the Year.

VII. Other related publications

28. Several important United Nations journals and other publications that provide crucial information on freshwater issues could be used for promotion of the Year. The UNEP Global Environment Outlook Report being prepared for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 will focus on the state of regional and global water resources as well as on responses to the threats to them. Special issues of *Natural Resources Forum*, the *Natural Resources Newsletter*, the *International Rivers and Lakes* newsletter and the *WMO Bulletin* are expected to be issued in conjunction with the Year during 2003.

VIII. Funding considerations

29. Freshwater issues are a concern for all. Fund-raising appeals for the International Year of Freshwater will therefore be addressed to all stakeholders, such as Governments, non-governmental organizations and private foundations. Because of their increasing political importance, freshwater activities have received improved financial support in recent years from a variety of sources. A number of possible donor countries are actively involved in promoting the sustainable use and management of freshwater resources. Appeals will be made for funds to those countries and other potential donors.

30. Support will also be sought from public foundations, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. An international art competition and auction with paintings of freshwater subjects is being considered by private donors to raise money for water-related projects in developing countries. Merchandizing licensed products such as compact discs and T-shirts with the Year's logo and theme is also being considered. Benefit concerts organized by public foundations, with support from the private sector and non-governmental organizations, have been proposed to raise funds for projects in developing countries.

31. It is expected that the United Nations system could contribute to fund raising through a variety of means and projects, including the production and sale of United Nations stamps with reference to freshwater themes.

32. Proceeds from fund raising could be used primarily to raise awareness of and improve educational programmes about water resource conservation and management in developing countries upon request during the International Year of Freshwater.

IX. Some expected results

33. The International Year of Freshwater should provide an opportunity to initiate processes that advance issues of sustainable water resource

development and management far beyond 2003. The Year should follow a participatory approach and involve the whole range of relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, it should:

(a) Increase awareness about the importance of water resources for human life and nature, as well as the necessity of sustainable approaches to water resource development and management;

(b) Generate long-term research and development projects initiated to address critical water resource issues, such as efficient use and allocation of scarce and shared water resources and increased understanding of aquatic ecosystems;

(c) Facilitate the development of appropriate policies for sustainable development and management of water resources at the international and national levels;

(d) Increase the number of local activities aimed at improving livelihood opportunities. Those activities should stress participatory approaches and could be targeted towards vulnerable groups, such as women, children, low-income groups, indigenous people and people in dry-land areas.

X. Next steps

34. The next important steps are to continue working along the lines of the present report and to develop further the strong water resource links between entities of the United Nations system, Governments, the private sector and civil society. A key meeting for further discussions on possible theme, funding, expected outcomes and division of labour will be the twenty-second session of the Subcommittee on Water Resources in September 2001. A progress report will be submitted to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session.

Notes

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), vol. I: *Resolutions adopted by the Conference*, resolution 1, annex II.

[2] See United Nations Environment Programme, Convention on Biological Diversity (Environmental Law and Institution Programme Activity Centre), June 1992.

[3] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1954, No. 33480.

[4] A/AC.237/18 (Part II)/Add.1 and Corr.1, annex I.